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SUBJECT: CZECHS SAY CUBA CONFERENCE A SUCCESS

REF: PRAGUE 388

Classified By: Acting Political-Economic Counselor  
Karen C. Reider for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. The Czech MFA, in cooperation with Czech NGOs, recently hosted a Conference on Cuba in Prague to search for common ground with other EU member states active in Cuba, and share the best practice of European NGOs working there. The Conference participants included MFA representatives from Spain and other EU member states, and European NGOs active in Cuba. MFA participants supported the development of a "mid-term" position on Cuba focused on human rights and transition after Castro's death, and agreed that the European Council should issue conclusions following the June GAERC that reflect the dire human rights situation in Cuba. NGO participants urged MFA participants to (1) support increased access to the Internet for Cubans, (2) monitor acts of repudiation, and (3) support the Damas en Blanco. End summary.

¶2. (C) Poloff met with Stanislav Kazecky, Czech diplomat expelled from Cuba (reftel), and Jarmila Povejsilova, Czech MFA Cuba Desk Officer, to discuss the April 25-26 Cuba Conference held in Prague. Povejsilova confirmed the Conference had two goals: (1) provide a private forum where Czech and Spanish MFA officials (as well as officials from other EU countries) could identify common ground on which to base a new EU common position, and (2) encourage European NGOs to share best practices in support of the democratic opposition, and to share their experience with MFA officials. Povejsilova said the Conference successfully met both goals.

¶3. (C) The Conference was hosted by the Czech MFA in cooperation with Czech NGOs People in Need (PIN) and International Committee on Cuban Democracy (ICDC). Conference participants included: (1) MFA representatives from the Czech Republic, Spain, Poland, and the Slovak Republic; (2) diplomats representing Swedish, Dutch, and Hungarian missions in Prague; and (3) European NGOs active in Cuba (see paragraph 10 below).

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Next Step: Develop Strong Mid-term Position on Cuba  
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¶4. (C) According to Povejsilova, the EU government participants all agreed the human rights situation in Cuba is unacceptable and getting worse. While there was no agreement on how or whether to change the EU common position, the participants, including Spain, agreed that a common mid-term strategy on Cuba was advisable. Such a strategy should focus

on human rights abuses and planning for a post-Castro Cuba. To that end, the participants agreed that following the June GAERC, the Council should issue a strongly worded conclusion that reflects the current human rights situation in Cuba.

¶5. (C) Povejsilova said the Conference provided a useful opportunity to speak frankly with Spain. Spain conceded that dialogue with the regime has not brought positive results. Yet, Spain continues to believe that engagement with the Castro regime is necessary, at least at some level, because these officials are likely to remain in the government after Castro dies. However, Spain also agreed on the need to support the peaceful opposition and provide material assistance.

¶6. (C) On next steps, Povejsilova said the Czechs do not plan to raise Cuba at the upcoming Latin American-EU Summit in Vienna on May 12 (although she thinks Cuba could become an issue when the terms of the joint Summit declaration are negotiated). Instead, the Czechs will await the release of the EU Heads of Mission Report on Cuba (expected the week of May 15). They plan to use the report's recommendations to advocate for tough GAERC conclusions on Cuba, including: (1) sharp criticism of the human rights situation, (2) acknowledgment that dialogue has produced no tangible benefits, and (3) a recommendation to continue dialogue with the peaceful opposition and provide material assistance (including Internet access).

¶7. (C) Povejsilova said the Austrian Presidency has become a stronger supporter of human rights in Cuba since January. She said the Czechs were pleased that the Presidency recently spoke with the Cuban MFA and condemned Stanislav Kazecky's expulsion, and the recent attack on a Cuban dissident. (Note: the Czechs believe, and she thinks the Presidency agrees, that the Cubans expelled Kazecky in retaliation for the Czech position on Cuba, not because of anything Kazecky did. End note.) Povejsilova said the Presidency rejected the Cuban MFA's statement that the expulsion was a bilateral issue. The Presidency characterized it instead as an issue affecting EU solidarity.

¶8. (C) Kazecky, who attended the Conference's NGO forum, said NGO participants discussed ways to support the Cuban democratic opposition, and presented the following recommendations to EU government representatives: (1) support increased access to the Internet for Cubans in EU Embassies; (2) closely monitor acts of repudiation; and (3) focus programs and support on the Damas en Blanco.

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Comment  
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¶9. (C) The EU attitude toward the Castro regime may be shifting, albeit at a glacial pace. Following Kazecky's expulsion in April and the subsequent beating of a well-known Cuban dissident, the Austrian presidency seems to be focused on human rights abuses in Cuba. The Czechs appear to be gaining support from other EU members active in Cuba, particularly on the need to confront human rights abuses there. Arguably, Spain's participation in the Conference, and notably its acknowledgment that engagement with the Castro regime has been unsuccessful, suggests that even Spain may be willing to rethink its approach. These conditions could ultimately lead to a change in the EU common position on Cuba, although the nature of the change, if any, is unclear. This may be a good time for the USG to discretely suggest positions the EU could adopt that would have a meaningful impact on the regime. (For example, a position that links a demand for specific human rights reforms to continued European tourism.)

¶10. The list of NGO Conference invitees reads like a Who's Who for future USG on-island programming purposes.

-- Czech Republic: People in Need, Association for International Affairs, and Pontes (not affiliated with the Slovak NGO, Pontis Foundation)

-- Germany: The International Society for Human Rights,  
Konrad Adenauer Foundation, and Friedrich Ebert Foundation

-- Hungary: Freedom House, and the Hungarian Helsinki  
Committee

-- Netherlands: Pax Christi, and Cuba Futuro

-- Poland: Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe,  
Helsinki Committee, the Batory Foundation, and the Lech  
Walesa Institute

-- Slovakia: Pontis Foundation, and People in Peril

-- Spain: Asociacion Espanola Cuba en Transicion, Encuentro  
de la Cultura Cubana, Fundacion Hispano-Cubana, and  
Asociacion Iberoamericana por la Libertad

-- Serbia: E 57

-- Sweden: the Swedish International Liberal Center, and the  
Swedish Helsinki Committee.  
CABANISS